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Does Personalization Increase Turnout?

***Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2014 European Parliament Elections**

Abstract

The 2014 European Parliament elections were the first elections where the major political groups each nominated a lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidat*) for the Commission presidency in the hope that this would increase the visibility of the elections and mobilize more citizens to turn out. Using data from the 2014 European Elections Study, an EU-wide post-election survey, we analyse whether and how the presence of the lead candidates influenced the individual propensity to participate in these elections. Our findings show that the recognition of the candidates increased the propensity to turn out, even when controlling for a host of other individual-level factors explaining turnout and the context factors known to facilitate participation. Furthermore, the campaign efforts of the candidates increased turnout, and reinforced the effect of candidate recognition.

Key words: turnout, campaign, personalization, European Parliament, *Spitzenkandidaten*

Introduction

Ahead of the 2014 elections, the European Parliament (EP) boldly announced that “This time it’s different.” At the heart of this claim was a constitutional innovation in the Lisbon Treaty’s article 17, which stated that the results of the European Parliament elections should be taken into account when selecting the next Commission President. To reinforce this link, the member parties of the major political groups of the European Parliament decided to each rally behind a common lead candidate (or *Spitzenkandidat* in the commonly used German term). Hence, for the first time in the history of the European Parliament, the extra-parliamentary party organisation of five major political groups of the European Parliament offered voters a choice regarding the next President of the European Commission: Jean Claude Juncker (European People’s Party, EPP), Martin Schulz (Party of European Socialists, PES), Guy Verhofstadt (Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe, ALDE), Ska Keller and José Bové (European Green Party), and Alexis Tsipras (Party of the European Left).¹ The European Parliament’s hope was that this innovation would firstly mobilize voters to take a greater interest in European elections and secondly increase its own power *vis-à-vis* the Council. While the attempt of the Parliament to impose the lead candidate of the largest group as Commission President was met with some opposition,² the EP ultimately won the inter-institutional battle when Juncker became Commission President. However, this leaves the question of what impact, if any, the innovation of candidates competing for the Commission presidency had on the nature of the elections.

One crucial concern about electoral democracy in the Union is the persistently low turnout in European Parliament elections with less than half the electorate turning out to vote since 1999. The potential to increase political participation was therefore also at the heart of the European Commission’s support for the *Spitzenkandidaten* innovation, as they hoped this could “contribute to raising the turnout for European elections by strengthening the link between the election of the

representatives of the citizens with the selection and election process of the head of the European executive” (European Commission 2013:6). Critics of the European Parliament’s claim to provide a democratic mandate for the next Commission president, however, have argued that there was generally very little awareness of the lead candidates among voters, and that their impact on turnout and vote choices was thus most likely negligible (see e.g. Open Europe 2014). This study contributes to this politically salient debate by examining the extent to which *Spitzenkandidaten* mobilized voters to turn out in the elections.

In what follows we analyse whether and how the lead candidates affected the voting behaviour of EU citizens in the 2014 European Parliament election. Analysing the 2014 European Election Study (EES) post-electoral survey (Schmitt et al. 2015), we find a mobilizing effect of candidate recognition and campaign activity of the three most visible candidates in the race (i.e. Juncker, Schulz and Verhofstadt) on turnout. We also demonstrate that candidate recognition reinforces the effect of campaign activities on the propensity to turn out. This has implications for the study of electoral democracy in the European Union (EU) and our understanding of campaign effects more generally.

The Emergence of a Parliamentary System in the EU

There were high hopes in Brussels that a stronger link between vote choice in European Parliament elections and the election of the Commission President would bolster interest in European elections and thereby strengthen the legitimacy of the EU as a whole (European Commission 2013; European Parliament 2014). At the heart of the argument in favour of *Spitzenkandidaten* is the expectation that it strengthens executive accountability in the European Union. One of the central concerns about the so-called democratic deficit is that the EU has until recently lacked mechanisms for citizens to hold the EU executive to account, or “to throw the

rascals out” of executive office, through the process of competitive elections (Follesdal and Hix, 2006; Hobolt and Tilley, 2014). The EU is a trans-national system of multi-level governance (Hooghe and Marks, 2001, 2003) with many of the features of national democracies, such as direct elections to one of the main legislative chambers. However, unlike in parliamentary systems of democracy, there is no clear link between the party choice in parliamentary elections and the executive (the European Commission), at least not until recently. Prior to the Maastricht Treaty, the Commission President was chosen unanimously by the national governments of the member states. The public therefore had no direct way of influencing the election of the EU’s executive or hold it to account for its actions. The fact that European elections did not lead to the formation of a “government” has long been regarded as a key reason for why citizens are much less likely to vote (see Franklin and Hobolt, 2011; Reif and Schmitt, 1980; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996).

The Parliament’s powers vis-à-vis the EU’s executive have been strengthened in successive treaty revisions: the Maastricht Treaty (1993) introduced a new “investiture procedure” where the Council must consult the European Parliament on their nominee for the Commission president and Parliament’s approval was required before the Member States could appoint the President and Members of the Commission as a collegiate body. The Amsterdam Treaty (1999) took matters further by requiring Parliament’s specific approval for the appointment of the Commission President, prior to that of the other Commissioners. Parliament also introduced hearings of Commissioners-designate in 1994. These reforms, however, did little to strengthen the link between voters and the EU executive, or mobilize citizen interest in EP elections (e.g. Hix and Lord, 1997; Lodge, 1996). Due to their perceived insignificance, the elections continued to be “second-order national elections” (Reif and Schmitt, 1980), where a majority of voters stayed at home, and others cast a vote in protest against national government or with their hearts without any regard to government formation (e.g., Hix and Marsh, 2007; Marsh,

1998; van der Eijk and Franklin, 1996).

These problems led scholars and politicians alike to suggest constitutional innovations that could remedy the perceived democratic deficit in the European Union. The idea of Euro-parties nominating competing candidates was already discussed in the 1990s by scholars such as Simon Hix (see Hix, 1997, 1998). The core objective was to inject real political and personalized choice into the EP election campaigns by having competing candidates for Commission President, with alternative political agendas, nominated the by Euro-parties, and the candidate of the winning party group would in turn be nominated by the Council and elected by the European Parliament to become the President of the Commission. As Hix noted optimistically in 2008, such changes could lead to “public identification of the policy options on the EU table and the winners and losers in the EU. In short, there would be democratic politics in the EU for the first time” (Hix, 2008: 164).

These discussions about how to strengthen electoral accountability, and enhance public interest in European Parliament elections also played a central role in the debates leading to the failed Constitutional Treaty process and, in turn, the Lisbon Treaty (2009). In the Lisbon Treaty the investiture procedure was revised to emphasize that the European Council should ‘take into account the elections’ before nominating and that the European Parliament subsequently ‘elects’ the Council nominee.³ The wording of the treaty is ambiguous when it comes to the powers of the European Parliament to impose its own candidate. But the European Parliament seized upon the treaty change by deciding that the European political groups would nominate lead candidates for the post of European Commission president. In a resolution agreed on 22 November 2012, the European Parliament presented its main argument:

[The Parliament] urges the European political parties to nominate candidates for the Presidency of the Commission and expects those candidates to play a leading role in the

parliamentary electoral campaign, in particular by personally presenting their programme in all Member States of the Union; stresses the importance of reinforcing the political legitimacy of both Parliament and the Commission by connecting their respective elections more directly to the choice of the voters.⁴

This message was reinforced by a resolution of the European Commission (2013).⁵ Both institutions thus echo the message found in the academic literature concerning the key objectives of the reformed process of nominating and electing the Commission president. The aim is to transform the nature of elections to the European Parliament by creating a genuine contest for the top executive job and a choice between alternative political platforms. The hope is that this would mobilize citizens to take part in the elections and, in turn, contribute to the EU's legitimacy.

In addition to these high democratic hopes, there may also be more prosaic inter-institutional reasons for the *Spitzenkandidaten*. By introducing its own candidate with the democratic legitimacy conveyed by the vote of Europe's citizenry, the European Parliament put significant pressure on national governments to nominate the elected candidate to accept informally, if not formally, the Parliament's right to appoint the EU's executive, as it eventually happened (Schimmelfennig, 2014). However, this paper focuses on the extent to which there is any evidence that the *Spitzenkandidaten* had the desired impact on the campaign and the vote, by raising the stakes of the vote, personalising the electoral campaign, and thus attracting more voters to the polls.

***Spitzenkandidaten* in the 2014 campaign**

While the Parliament's slogan that "this time is different" held plenty of promise, there were significant challenges to overcome for the *Spitzenkandidaten* to have any real impact on the

campaign and the elections. The first of these challenges is the lack of an EU wide common public sphere with a common media, not to mention the lack of a common language in which alternative political visions could be more easily discussed. Recent studies have shown an increasing ‘parallelization’ of public spheres across Europe, where similar if not the same issues are being debated at the same time (see Koopmans and Statham, 2010; Kriesi and Grande, 2014). However, whether this allows for a Europe-wide public debate on the elections akin to what we know from federal systems is an open question. Second, while the candidates were officially nominated by Euro-parties, it is still national parties that dominate the election campaigns. The lead candidates’ impact on national campaigns was therefore crucially dependent on the extent to which national parties and media involved the Pan-European candidates in their national campaign. As predicted in the second-order elections framework (Marsh and Mikhaylov, 2010; Reif and Schmitt, 1980), such parties had strong incentives to fight on domestic issues (e.g. national opposition parties against the national government) and even to deliberately disassociate themselves from the *Spitzenkandidaten* (as happened in the UK). Finally, the procedures adopted by the two major groups to nominate their candidates resulted in the nomination of two Brussels insiders, Juncker (former Prime Minister of Luxembourg and head of the Euro-Zone) and Schulz (President of the European Parliament). It was argued that the two had been selected for their European credentials rather than for their broad electoral appeal.

Despite these challenges, the lead candidates did make efforts to run a distinctly European campaign. The five candidates had a total budget of €4.5 million (Pop, 2014), with Schulz, Juncker and Verhofstadt commanding most of it (this can be compared to an estimated spending of \$2.6 billion in the last US presidential elections). Among the more eye-catching initiatives were the nine televised debates between the *Spitzenkandidaten* that took place between 9 April and 20 May 2014. They were conducted in French, English and German, and

broadcast on the internet, on Euronews and on selected national channels. A post-election survey of citizens in 15 EU countries suggests that 15 per cent of European citizens have seen at least one of the TV debates (AECR 2014).⁶ Not surprisingly these debates generated the most interest in the “home countries” of the lead candidates: in Luxembourg (Juncker) and in Greece (Tsipras) where 36 and 26 per cent of respondents respectively reported to have watched one of the debates whereas only 6 per cent of Dutch and British citizens had seen any of the debates.

In addition to these debates, the candidates also had a substantial presence on the ground. In the two months prior to election day Schulz had 38 visits in 20 countries, Juncker covered 17 countries and participated in 34 campaign visits (i.e. days spent in the country), while Verhofstadt had a more “modest” presence with only 29 visits in 12 countries. These numbers might underestimate the true effort of the candidates, as they do not take into account that they often visited several cities or attended several campaign events on the same day (see Appendix 2 for a description of the campaign events). Most of these visits were classic campaigning events such as meeting party activists and party supporters, participating at large campaign gatherings, or meeting national candidates or national leaders.

In addition, candidates had a significant on-line presence. Schulz was the most active in the online environment with approximately 110k twitter followers and almost 250k mentions during the two months before the elections. Verhofstadt also had a non-trivial presence with 26k followers and 105k mentions in the same period, whereas Juncker was the least active twitter user of the three.⁷ We now turn to the question of whether these campaign activities – off- and online – managed to mobilize voters to take part in the elections.

Turnout in European Parliament elections

Union-wide participation in European Parliament elections started at a low level of 62 per cent in the first direct elections in 1979 and declined further to just 43 per cent over the subsequent elections. However, it is worth noting that this decline in average levels of turnout in EP elections can be largely accounted for by the changing composition of the EU electorate due to the multiple EU enlargements to countries with lower turnout habits in general elections.⁸ Nonetheless, these low levels of turnout have attracted a great deal of attention both among policy-makers and scholars. Much of the focus has been on whether low turnout is a reflection of critical or even hostile attitudes towards the European Union. Indeed, it is a popular view in the media that Euroscepticism is a major driving force behind European election abstention (see also Blondel et al., 1998; Evans and Ivaldi, 2011; Mattila, 2003; Steinbrecher and Rattinger, 2012). However, the tenor of the analyses of individual level participation seems to point in a different direction.

In line with the second-order elections model, the main factor explaining low turnout seems to be the fact that so little is at stake in these elections. Individual-level analyses of turnout in European Parliament elections have repeatedly identified the same factors that contribute to our understanding of participation in first-order elections: social and political integration (being married, union membership and church attendance), habituation, political involvement (interest in politics, partisanship) and resources (education) are relevant here. On the supply side, the availability of suitable choice options has also been shown to play a significant role (van der Eijk and Schmitt, 2009; Wessels and Franklin, 2009). This is not to say that Euroscepticism has no influence on turnout, but that the evidence suggests that the main determinants of electoral participation in European election are the conventional ones drivers of abstention rather than citizens' attitudes about the EU. Building on this, we explore how *Spitzenkandidaten*, through their mobilizing efforts, can contribute to raising individuals' propensity to turnout.

We focus on two distinct mechanisms through which *Spitzenkandidaten* can increase voter mobilization. The first is *personalization*. Rosenstone and Hansen (1993) were among the first to put forward this argument. By looking beyond the classical explanations focusing on resources and attitudes, they emphasized the importance of the strategic effort of political leaders and the competition between them for mobilizing the electorate. This is even more important in the context of low levels of participation, such as European Parliament. In this context, party leaders (e.g. *Spitzenkandidaten*) play a more important role in mobilizing voters as they offer citizens the possibility to identify with individuals who personify their political goals and objectives (McAllister, 2007; Milner and Ladner, 2006). Therefore, no matter whether citizens like them or not, the mere presence of identifiable leaders should increase the probability of voting (McAllister, 2007)⁹. The arrival of competing pan-European personalities in EP election campaigns is expected to have exactly the same effect, namely that it offered the European citizenry the possibility to associate EP party groups with identifiable leaders and thus increase turnout. The low level of competitiveness was previously seen as a major cause for non-voting in EP elections (van der Eijk and Schmitt, 2009). We thus expect that those individuals who are aware of the lead candidates and their role during the campaign would be more likely to turn out, as the presence of Pan-European candidates could increase the interest in and potentially highlight the significance of the European elections. This leads to our first hypothesis:

H1: Individuals who are able to recognize one or more of the lead candidates for the position of president of the European Commission are more likely to turn out to vote in European Parliament elections.

The second mechanism refers to the *campaign activities* of the lead candidates. Previous research emphasizes that parties and candidates play a substantial role in mobilizing the electorate

during the electoral campaign (Gerber and Green, 2000; Jackson, 1996; Karp et al., 2008; Leighley, 1995). Although this is usually measured at the individual level, by assessing the impact of canvassing and contacts on the propensity to cast a vote, it clearly shows the important mobilizing effect of party and candidate mobilization on voter turnout across contexts (Gerber and Green, 2000; Karp et al., 2008). All in all, an active campaign is expected to engage, inform and motivate voters leading to a higher turnout (Hillygus, 2005; Holbrook and McClurg, 2005; Jackson, 1997). Starting from similar premises, Jones (1998) does indeed show that in the context of the US elections turnout was higher in the counties which were visited by the presidential candidates. Given the campaign effort of the *Spitzenkandidaten* described in a previous section, we can expect that their campaign activities had a similar mobilizing effect. We therefore formulate our second hypothesis:

H2: In political systems where the *Spitzenkandidaten* actively campaigned, individuals are likely more to turn out if they recognize them.

This is not to say that the effects of personalization, operationalized here as candidate recognition, and campaign activities are unrelated. We argue that candidate recognition reinforces the effect of campaign activities on turnout. The relationship could also be one where higher recognition rates are at least in part an outcome of the candidates' campaign activities, since campaign activities increase the political information available to voters about individual candidates (Jacobson, 1992; Shineman, 2012). However, we believe that in the case of the *Spitzenkandidaten*, this is less likely for a number reasons. The top three contenders were not complete unknowns before the campaign.¹⁰ Moreover, given that citizens have a higher propensity to pay attention to the campaign of the candidates they favour (Vavreck et al., 2002), we can also expect that they pay

more attention to the campaign activities of candidates who they already know. Thus, we anticipate that recognition facilitates the effect of the candidates' campaign activities. Previous research has also shown that campaign activities (like visits and TV appearances) have a greater effect on citizens that have at least some basic previous knowledge of the candidates that campaign (Joslyn and Ceccoli, 1996; King and Morehouse, 2004; Vavreck et al., 2002). Based on all of this, we formulate our final hypothesis:

H3: In political systems where the Spitzenkandidaten actively campaigned, individuals are more to turn out if they recognize them.

Data and methods

To test these hypotheses, the paper presents the first analysis of the European Election Study (EES) 2014 Voter Study (Schmitt et al. 2015).¹¹ Following in the tradition of previous European Election Studies, this is a nationally representative post-election survey that was conducted in each of the 28 member countries of the EU. Approximately 1,100 respondents were interviewed in each EU member country, which adds to a total sample size of 30,064. The study was commissioned in collaboration with the Public Opinion Monitoring Unit of the European Parliament and was carried out by TNS Opinion in collaboration with its local partners between 30 May and 27 June 2014. All the interviews were carried out face to face (by way of Computer Assisted Personal Interviews, or CAPI)¹².

The dependent variable of this paper is turnout. It is measured by a standard self-reported turnout question that also includes a memory cue (the date of the elections) and a "face saving" statement ("For one reason or another, some people in [OUR COUNTRY] did not vote in these elections").

Our key explanatory variables capture individual-level awareness of the *Spitzenkandidaten* as well as cross-national variation in exposure to their campaign activity. The difficulties in pinpointing campaign effects empirically are well-known, not least when using observational cross-sectional data, such as the EES. A key concern is that it is hard to distinguish between campaign effects that are the result of actual mobilization that occurred during the campaign and those that are due to pre-existing differences between people who are more exposed to the campaign (e.g. the more politically interested) and those who are not (e.g. the less politically interested). To be more specific: those who recognized the *Spitzenkandidaten* and those who didn't may also differ on a number of other dimensions related to their likelihood to turn out, leading to a possible over-estimation of the recognition effect (Levendusky, 2011: 45). One solution would be to rely on experimental research – either embedded in the survey, in the laboratory or in the field - which avoids many of these inferential problems. In this study, however, where we are interested in the effects of a particular constitutional innovation in the EU and how its implementation has varied across member states, experiments are not ideal. Relying on cross-national survey data has the advantage of greater external validity compared to the artificial setting of a laboratory experiment, and the much more limited geographical scope of most field experiments. While causality can never be established with complete certainty using an observational design, we do take several steps to reduce causal inference problems in our study.

First, we operationalize awareness of *Spitzenkandidaten* using a factual knowledge question, rather than a subjective assessment of knowledge, since that is more likely to capture people who have actually been exposed to information about the candidates. We use a “name-party” recognition battery that requires respondents to identify which EP party group or which national party supports the nomination of each of the three most important candidates: Jean-

Claude Juncker, Martin Schulz and Guy Verhofstadt. This requires voters to be familiar with both the candidates and to be able to associate them with a specific party. The respondents were offered four response options,¹³ so that a random guess was less likely to produce a correct answer. Second, we minimize the “omitted variables bias” by controlling for all the key factors, such as campaign engagement, education, political interest, partisanship and political efficacy, which are likely to be associated with both turnout and awareness of the *Spitzenkandidaten*. These control variables are discussed in more detail below. Third, in addition to measuring the mobilizing effect of the candidates at the individual level, we also capture their campaign activities as a context-level predictor (H2), and importantly we examine whether recognition can moderate the effect of the campaign context (H3).

As a proxy for campaign activity we measure the number of campaign visits of each candidate per member country. Taking into consideration both the limited campaign budgets of the candidates and their considerable activity on the ground, these visits seem to be the most important campaigning tool of the *Spitzenkandidaten*. Moreover, campaign visits in a specific country were likely to be covered in the national press which in turn would result in a greater exposure to the lead candidates’ messages.¹⁴ To test H3, we include an interaction term between campaign visits and individual candidate recognition. This allows us to examine whether individual-level candidate awareness reinforces the effect of the campaigning context on turnout.

As mentioned above, we also include a host of control variables that are customarily used to explain the propensity of turnout in order to isolate the mobilizing effect of the *Spitzenkandidaten*. The first group of controls seek to capture campaign engagement (i.e. exposure to the campaign, campaign involvement and contact by a party) and general political engagement (interest in politics, level of political discussion, internal political efficacy, partisanship, and news consumption). These variables are generally considered as proxies for political mobilization

(Gerber and Green, 2000; Verba et al., 1995; Zuckerman et al., 2007) and individual resources (Burns et al., 2001; Verba and Nie, 1972; Verba et al., 1995), both of which are known to be strong predictors of turnout. Including these indicators thus allows us to control for possible confounding factors that determine both candidate recognition and the propensity to vote.

Endogeneity problems can never be entirely ruled out in observational studies, since the decision to turn out in the election may lead people to seek out the relevant information that would help them make the best choice (Downs, 1957; Lassen, 2005), which could, in turn, increase candidate recognition (i.e. reverse causality). However, by controlling for the level of political engagement of respondents, we reduce the possibility that the relation between recognition and propensity to participate is a result of previous knowledge or of information acquired during the electoral campaign. Thus, we can argue with greater certainty that any effect of candidate recognition on the turnout is a result of the “mobilizing effect” of the *Spitzenkandidaten*.

We also control for social background variables that are indicative for social integration and individual resources. Historically these were among primary variables used to explain individual turnout (Rosenstone and Hansen, 1993; Verba et al., 1995). They include union membership, church attendance, rural vs. urban residence, but also age, education, gender, marital status, employment status, immigrant status, and internet use. Finally, we also include attitudes towards political institutions that have been shown to be associated with turnout: trust in national parliaments, trust in EU institutions and attitudes towards EU membership. At the macro level, we control for compulsory voting, whether other elections took place at the same time as the EP elections, number of MEPs (as a proxy for population size) and turnout in the last legislative election before the EP elections¹⁵, as these are all factors that were shown in previous studies to have a strong influence on turnout in EP elections (e.g. Franklin and Hobolt, 2011; Wessels and Franklin, 2009). Furthermore, given the specificity of these elections, we also control

for a possible “home country” effect by using a dummy variable that takes the value 1 for the three countries of the candidates (Germany, Luxembourg and Belgium) and zero otherwise.¹⁶ All independent variables were rescaled to have values between a theoretical minimum of 0 and a theoretical maximum of 1, thus allowing for a direct comparison of the strength of their effects (see Appendix 1 for a complete description of all variables).

In order to test our hypotheses, we proceed in two steps. First we present country level descriptive data, which provide illustrative evidence of the aggregate relation between turnout and the mobilisation efforts of the candidates. Second we estimate a series of multilevel logistic regression models to identify the mobilization effects of the *Spitzenkandidaten* on the propensity to vote in the 2014 EP elections.¹⁷ Our unit of analysis at the higher level is party systems rather than countries.¹⁸ We use random intercepts and random slopes for the variables measuring candidate recognition and grand mean centring for aggregate level variables (Enders and Tofighi, 2007).

Empirical Analysis

We start with some descriptive statistics showing turnout levels in the 2014 EP elections and the country-specific campaign of the *Spitzenkandidaten* (recognition and campaign activity).

[Table 1 around here]

Although the motto for the current European elections was “This time it’s different”, at a first glance this was not reflected in the 42.61% overall turnout level, which is still very low when compared to the turnout registered in first-order national elections. Nonetheless, when we exclude turnout in Croatia – the Union’s most recent member that did not participate in the 2009

election - turnout across the EU was slightly higher than in 2009 at 43.78%. Furthermore, in ten of the 28 countries, we notice an increase in turnout.

Turning to the campaign effects of the lead candidates, our data shows that the proportion of citizens who recognized the candidates (i.e. was able to link them to the correct party) is far from impressive. Only 19 per cent of respondents recognized Juncker and 17 per cent of them recognized Schulz. These numbers are even lower for the candidate of the smallest of the three political groups that we consider (Guy Verhofstadt), who was only recognised by 9 per cent of all respondents. Of course there are significant country differences as the candidates were better known in their countries of origin and the neighbouring ones than elsewhere.

To test whether individual candidate awareness and campaign activity had an effect on turnout, we estimated a series of multilevel models shown in Table 2. Model 1 serves mostly as a reference model because it includes all the relevant variables except for the recognition of candidates and the number of their visits. A quick inspection of this model shows that the coefficients generally support the extant literature. In addition we note that all subsequent models have a better fit than Model 1.

[Table 2 around here]¹⁹

Given the multicollinearity between recognizing the candidates (the correlation between recognizing Schulz and recognizing Juncker is 0.61), we chose to investigate these effects separately for each candidate. First, we note that the effects of recognition reach statistical significance in the case of all the candidates. What is more, these effects are quite substantive. In the case of Schulz, recognizing him increases the likelihood of casting a vote by 37 per cent. All else being equal²⁰, this corresponds to an increase of 7 percentage points (from 32 to 39 per cent) in the predicted probability that respondents who recognized him cast a vote. The effects are

similar for those who recognized Juncker. The predicted probability that they cast a vote is 44 per cent compared to 38 per cent for those who did not recognize him. For Verhofstadt, the size of the effect is substantially smaller, recognizing increasing the likelihood of casting a vote by only 17% per cent, which corresponds to an increase in the probability to vote of only 4% percentage points (from 37 to 41 per cent). . This is probably due to the fact that he was the least likely of the three to be nominated for the presidency; recognizing him therefore did very little to boost the interest in the EP elections and to mobilize citizens to go out and vote.

[Figure 1 around here]

Overall, campaign personalization by the *Spitzenkandidaten*, measured as recognition, had a substantial effect on the individual's propensity to turn out. Importantly, this effect remains when controlling for potentially confounding factors such as political engagement (both general and campaign specific). Since the effects of the variables capturing political engagement basically remain the same after including candidate recognition, it appears that the latter is not simply a facet of the former.²¹ This does not mean that we can fully correct for any bias resulting from the potentially endogenous relationship between recognition and turnout, but including the confounding factors certainly reduces the bias. Finally, given the rather small proportion of respondents who actually recognized the *Spitzenkandidaten*, we need to acknowledge that the impact of personalization on the overall level of turnout is bound to be rather small.

We also examine the impact of campaign activities of the lead candidates, measured as visits in a country during the campaign. Our basic expectation is that campaign visits facilitated the interest in and awareness of the forthcoming European Parliament election and thus mobilized turnout. When looking at the main effects of the campaign visits, we only record statistically

significant effects for Schulz (Model 3) and Verhofstadt (Model 4). In both cases the effects are substantial, but we need to note that effect of Schulz campaign visits is almost twice as strong in with comparison to the effect Verhofstadt campaigning visits.²² What is rather puzzling is the lack of effect of Juncker's campaign activities, even though he campaign more than Verhofstadt. One possible explanation might lie in his campaigning style. Verhofstadt's campaign involved more grassroots activities such as traditional campaign rallies and meetings with party activists and supporters. Juncker's campaign, by contrast, concentrated on meetings with top level politicians, organised press briefs, participation in gala dinners, and so on – all of which might have been conducive to securing a possible appointment to the presidency of the Commission after the election rather than mobilising electoral support in the first place (see Appendix 2 for the description of the campaign visits).

[Figure 2 around here]

It is also important to note that Models 2 to 5 have a better fit than Model 1 (as showed by the reduction in the AIC and -2 log likelihood). Moreover, we can clearly show that the effects of recognition (see Figure 1) and campaign visits (see Figure 2) are indeed quite substantive.²³

In addition to their direct effect on turnout, we expect these two facets of mobilization to be related. More specifically, we expect that the effect of campaigning will be stronger among those who recognize the candidates (*H.3*). The cumulative effect of recognition and campaign visits is presented in Models 5 to 5. We note that the interaction reaches statistical significance for Schulz (Model 6) and Verhofstadt (Model 7) but not for Juncker. These findings are confirmed by the joint significance of the interaction terms which is statistical significant for Schulz ($F=5.05$, $df=1$, significant at $p<0.05$) and Verhofstadt ($F=6.60$, $df=1$, significant at $p<0.05$) but not for Juncker ($F=0.01$, $df=1$, not statistically significant). The lack an interactive effect in the case of Juncker is

not surprising given that we did not find any effect of his campaign visits on turnout. Figures 3A, 3B and 3C support our understanding of these interaction effects.

[Figure 3A, 3B and 3C around here]

When plotting the change in predicted probability to vote depending on the visits of the candidates (see figures 3.A, 3.B and 3.C) both in the case of Schulz (Figure 3A) and Verhofstadt (3B), we note that visiting a country during the campaign had a statistically significant effect only for those who recognized them (i.e. only for those who recognized the candidates the difference between visited and not visited is statistically significant different than zero)²⁴ In the case of Schulz, the campaign visits increased the probability to vote by around 15 percentage points for those who recognized him as the S&D nominee. The effect is somewhat weaker for Verhofstadt (Figure 3B); citizens residing in countries that he visited and are able to identify him as the ALDE nominee are about 10 percentage points more likely to vote compared to those who recognize him but live in a country he did not visit. Furthermore, campaign visits had no effect for those who did not recognize these lead candidates. For Juncker, we cannot detect any moderating effect of campaign intensity; unsurprisingly given that the differences between groups are only driven by his recognition and his campaign intensity does not have a statistically significant effect per se. All in all, we find strong evidence for the moderating effect of personalization on campaign effects (i.e. visits). As we anticipated, campaign efforts only have a mobilizing effect for those who have at least some information regarding the candidates. Furthermore, it is also noteworthy that the highest probability of casting a vote was recorded among respondents who were able to identify Schulz and/or Verhofstadt as the lead candidate of their respective European party and live in region which the candidates have visited.

Discussion

The European Parliament election of 2014 will be remembered as a triumph for the Eurosceptical parties, such as the United Kingdom Independence Party and Front National in France. But there was another significant innovation introduced in the electoral process of that election which in the long run might prove to be more consequential. The members of the eighth directly elected European Parliament were chosen in an electoral campaign which was headed by pan-European *Spitzenkandidaten* from each of the five major political groups in the European Parliament, who campaigned as candidates for the Presidency of the European Commission. This “democratic innovation”, building on the Lisbon Treaty, was supported by both the European Parliament and the European Commission. For the first time in the history of direct elections to the European Parliament, voters would have a real choice that could be consequential for the election of the head of the EU’s executive body. The question is whether this innovation mattered for participation in the election. The likelihood for this to happen was not high. A meagre campaign budget, a short campaign, the diversity among local member parties representing the EU-wide party federations on the ground, the obstacles introduced by the variety of different languages spoken in the member countries – all of these factors posed a challenge to the mobilizing efforts of the *Spitzenkandidaten*.

Nonetheless, our results suggest that they indeed did manage to make a difference. Based on the analysis of the representative post-election European Election Study, we find that individual candidate recognition did positively affect the likelihood of EU citizens to participate. Citizens who knew the lead candidates were also more likely to turn out. The campaign efforts of these candidates also had a significant effect on electoral participation, both directly and in the interaction with personalization: campaign visits of the *Spitzenkandidaten* helped to further increase the likelihood of turnout among citizens who recognized them.

To be sure, these are fairly minor effects. Only a minority of our respondents, and hence of the members of the EU electorate, were able to identify correctly which political party the lead candidates belong to. And of course, this varies starkly between member countries. As a result, the mobilizing effect of the *Spitzenkandidaten* was limited as well. We also need to acknowledge that due the cross-sectional nature of our data we cannot be sure that we were able to fully correct for the possible endogenous relationship between candidate recognition and the decision to vote. We do, however, take measures to minimize this potential problem by controlling for all of the key factors that are normally associated to turnout. Moreover, given that we can find significant mobilizing effects in 2014, there are good reason to believe that this innovation of lead candidates might have an even greater effect next time around when voters will have an “incumbent” president to vote on.

Table 1: Election turnout and candidate recognition, country level descriptives.

Country	Turnout in the 2014 EP elections	Turnout in the 2009 EP elections	Differenc e in turnout (EP2014- EP2009)	Turnout in the previous legislative elections	Candidate recognition **			Number of campaign visits (i.e. starting two months before the elections)		
					Juncker	Schulz	Verhofs tadt	Juncker	Schulz	Verho fstadt
Austria	45.39%	45.97	-0.58%	74.91%	43.90%	39.77%	15.80%	1	1	1
Belgium	89.64%	90.39	-0.75%	89.45%	31.09%	25.55	69.46	4	2	8
Bulgaria	35.84%	38.99	-3.15%	52.49%	13.45%	17.63%	4.63%	1	1	0
Croatia	25.24%	20.84*	4.40%	54.17%	11.97%	10.58%	4.08%	0	1	1
Cyprus	43.97%	59.4	-15.43%	78.7%	17.17%	12.08%	5.66%	2	0	0
Czech Republic	18.2%	28.22	-10.02%	59.48%	4.5%	5.69%	3.40%	0	1	1
Denmark	56.3%	59.54	-3.24%	87.74%	17.42%	11.34%	3.23%	0	1	0
Estonia	36.52%	43.9	-7.38%	63.53%	4.32%	5.24%	2.12%	0	0	0
Finland	39.1%	38.6	2.4%	67.37%	25.18%	17.24%	11.50%	1	1	0
Flanders					34.40%	26.72%	77.28%	3	5	8
France	42.43%	40.63	1.8%	57.23%	12.48%	16.67%	2.42%	3	5	4
Germany	48.1%	43.27	4.83%	71.55%	63.65%	66.93%	8.01%	8	11	1
Great Britain					8.4%	2.03%	1.2%	0	0	0
Greece	59.97%	52.61	7.36%	62.47%	21.84%	18.25%	1.76%	2	0	2
Hungary	28.97%	36.31	-7.34%	61.73%	9.15%	9.69%	6.16%	0	0	0
Ireland	52.44%	58.64	-6.2%	70.05%	13.41%	5.00 %	13.15%	0	1	1
Italy	57.22%	65.05	-7.83%	75.19%	13.20%	20.26%	8.71%	1	2	5
Latvia	30.24%	53.7	-23.46%	59.49%	14.69%	4.17%	2.75%	2	0	0
Lithuania	47.35%	20.98	26.55%	52.93%	5.47%	7.48%	4.11%	0	0	0
Luxembourg	85.55%	90.76	-5.21%	91.15%	80.48%	45.91%	23.05%	1	1	0
Malta	74.8%	78.79	-3.99%	92.95%	34.37%	49.82%	4.23%	1	1	0
Netherlands	37.32%	36.75	0.57%	74.56%	23.44%	16.00 %	24.16%	1	0	1
Northern Ireland					10.36%	9.17%	4.73%	0	1	0
Poland	23.83%	24.53	-0.7%	48.92%	5.56%	6.79%	5.15%	1	1	1
Portugal	33.67%	36.77	-3.1%	58.03%	12.58%	9.20%	4.94%	2	1	0
Romania	32.44%	27.67	4.77%	41.76%	5.42%	11.64%	3.34%	0	1	1
Slovakia	13.05%	19.64	-6.59%	59.11%	6.58%	6.48%	5.11%	1	0	0
Slovenia	24.55%	28.37	-3.82%	65.6%	17.67%	15.84%	8.92%	0	1	1
Spain	43.81%	44.87	-1.06%	68.94%	10.94%	10.32%	3.35%	1	3	1
Sweden	51.07%	45.53	5.54%	84.63%	21.15%	11.54%	5.16%	0	1	1
UK	35.6%	34.7	0.7%	65.1%	8.87%	3.73%	2.04%	0	0	0
Wallonia					25.58%	23.97%	58.82%	5	3	7
EU mean	42,61%	43.00%	-0.46%	67.47%	18.91%	16.87%	8.78%			
EU mean (without Croatia)	43.78%	43.00%	0.78%							

* turnout level in the 2013 EP elections, ** unweighted

Table 2: Effect of candidate recognition and campaigning on turnout²⁵

	Model 1: Without the candidates	Model 2: Juncker	Model 3 Schulz	Model 4: Verhofstadt	Model 5: Juncker, visits interaction	Model 6: Schulz visits interaction	Model 7: Verhofstadt visits interaction
<i>Fixed effects</i>							
Intercept	-4.403*** (0.171)	-4.410*** (0.216)	-4.684*** (0.222)	-4.524*** (0.192)	-4.415*** (0.224)	-4.498*** (0.232)	-4.363*** (0.198)
candidate							
recognition		0.248*** (0.058)	0.314*** (0.067)	0.177* (0.087)	0.255** (0.097)	0.084 (0.121)	-0.063 (0.126)
knowledge	0.508*** (0.067)	0.459*** (0.067)	0.453*** (0.067)	0.493*** (0.067)	0.459*** (0.067)	0.452*** (0.067)	0.493*** (0.067)
interest	0.451*** (0.065)	0.425*** (0.065)	0.426*** (0.065)	0.448*** (0.065)	0.425*** (0.065)	0.425*** (0.065)	0.446*** (0.065)
political efficacy	3.812*** (0.126)	3.815*** (0.126)	3.811*** (0.126)	3.802*** (0.126)	3.815*** (0.126)	3.815*** (0.126)	3.804*** (0.126)
partisanship	0.580*** (0.035)	0.572*** (0.035)	0.568*** (0.035)	0.573*** (0.035)	0.571*** (0.035)	0.567*** (0.035)	0.572*** (0.035)
campaign							
involvement	1.911*** (0.107)	1.889*** (0.107)	1.880*** (0.107)	1.904*** (0.107)	1.889*** (0.107)	1.879*** (0.107)	1.902*** (0.107)
candidate							
campaign visits		0.177 (0.216)	0.520** (0.195)	0.305+ (0.180)	0.185 (0.237)	0.243 (0.221)	0.010 (0.204)
rec candidate X							
visits					-0.010 (0.116)	0.313* (0.140)	0.416* (0.162)
<i>Random effects</i>							
(variance)							
Intercept	0.253	0.276	0.285	0.281	0.274	0.64	0.257
candidate							
recognition		0.019	0.046	0.073	0.019	0.031	0.050
Residual							
(median)	0.247	0.250	0.247	0.251	0.250	0.247	0.249
N individual	24137	24137	24137	24137	24137	24137	24137
N system	30	30	30	30	30	30	30
Log Likelihood	-11,673	-11,655	-11,641	-11,661	-11,655	-11,639	-11,657
AIC	23,406	23,378	23,350	23,389	23,380	23,347	23,385

logit coefficients, standard errors in parenthesis; +denote p<0.1 *denotes p<0.05 ; **denotes p<0.01; ***denotes p<0.001

Figure 1: Unconditional effect of recognition (changes in predicted probabilities)

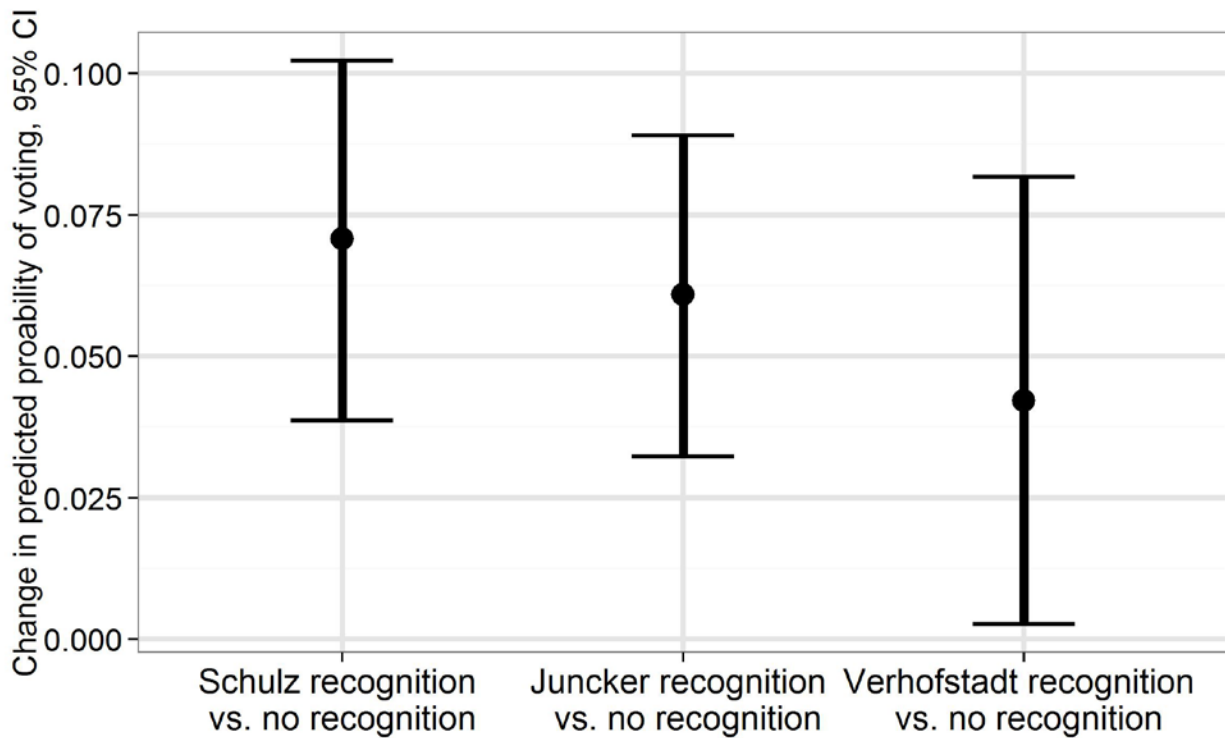


Figure 2: Unconditional effect of campaigning (changes in predicted probabilities)

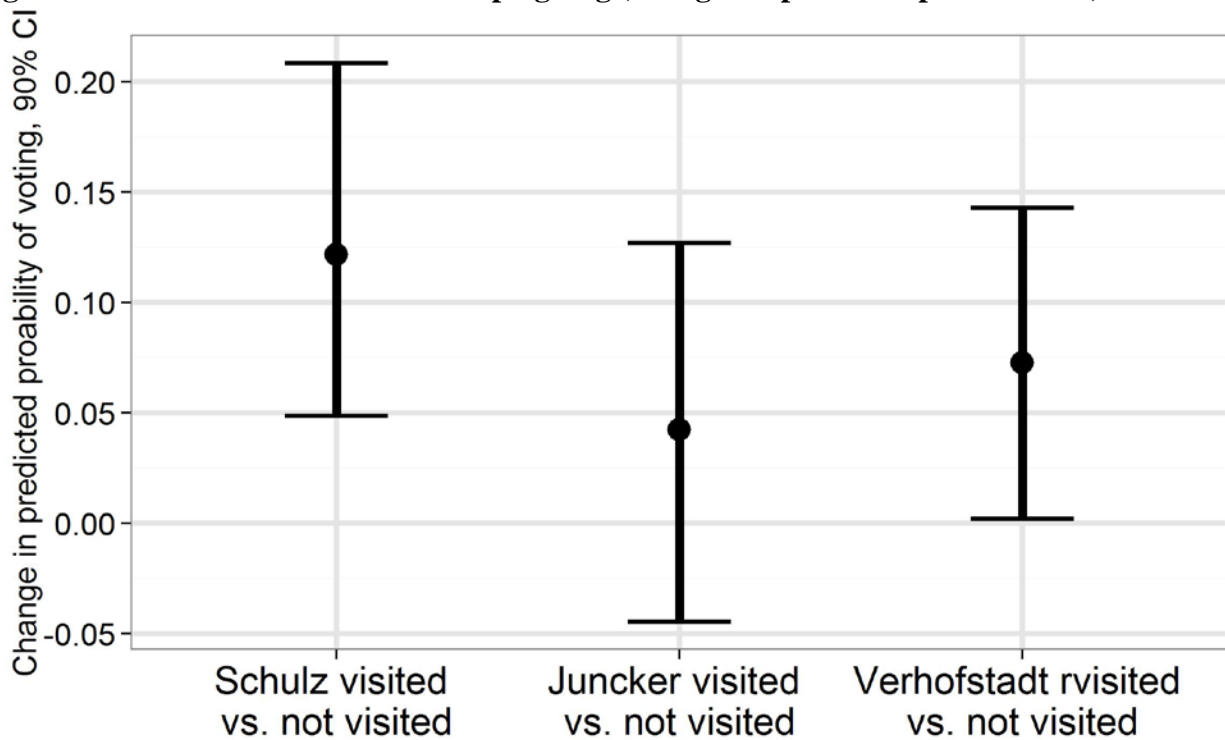


Figure 3.A: Moderating effect of recognition depending on campaign visits, Schulz (changes in predicted probabilities)

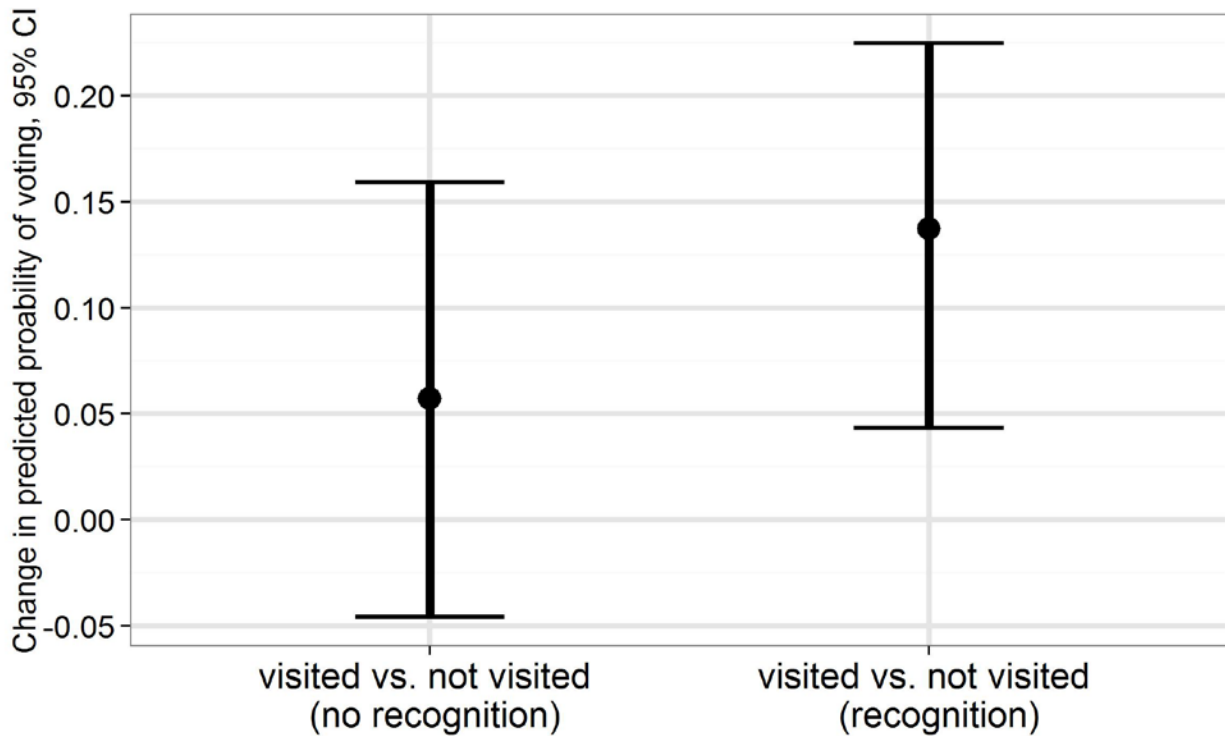


Figure 3.B Moderating effect of recognition depending on campaign visits, Verhofstadt (changes in predicted probabilities)

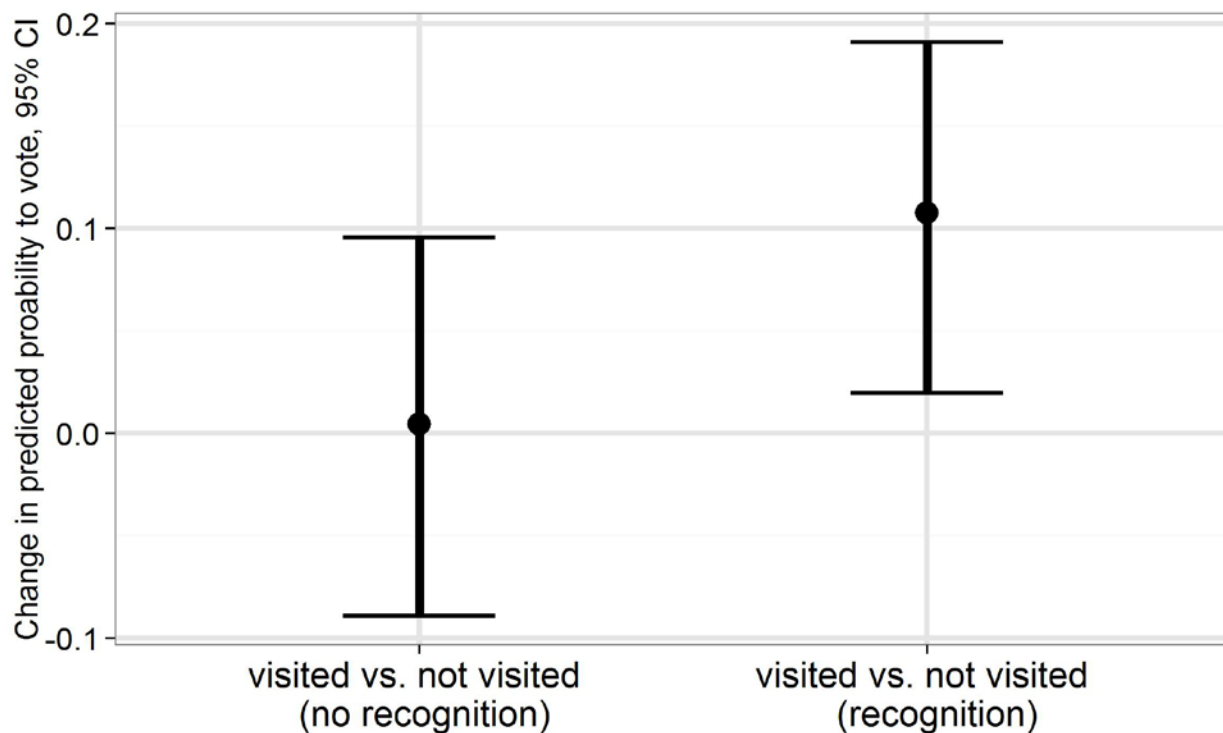
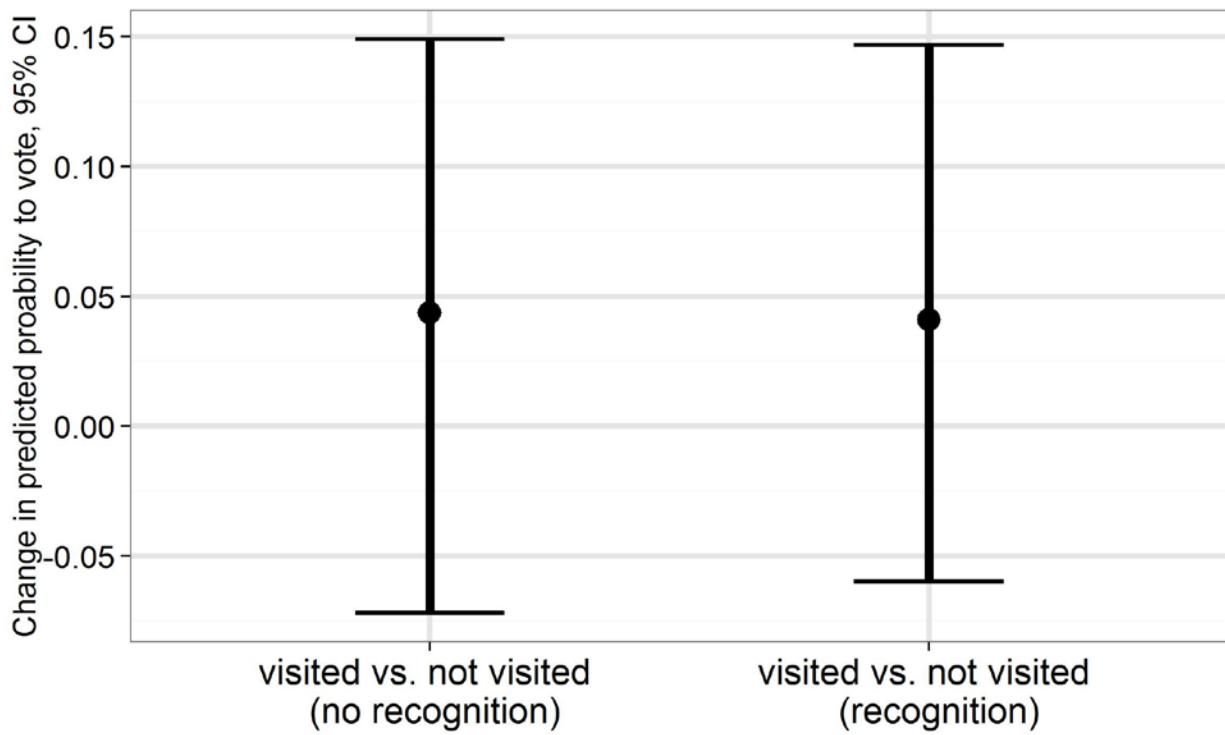


Figure 3C: Moderating effect of recognition depending on campaign visits, Juncker (changes in predicted probabilities)



Notes

¹ The two political groups that decided not to put forward candidates were the soft Eurosceptic European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) and the hard Eurosceptic Europe for Freedom and Democracy (EFD).

² The governments of the United Kingdom and Hungary most openly were opposed to this decision.

³ “Taking into account the elections to the European Parliament and after having held the appropriate consultations, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall propose to the European Parliament a candidate for President of the Commission. This candidate shall be elected by the European Parliament by a majority of its component members. If he does not obtain the required majority, the European Council, acting by a qualified majority, shall within one month propose a new candidate who shall be elected by the European Parliament following the same procedure”. (Article 17(7) TEU).

⁴ European Parliament Resolution of 22 November 2012 on the elections to the European Parliament in 2014 (2012/2829(RSP))

⁵ Commission Recommendation of 12 March 2013 on enhancing the democratic and efficient conduct of the elections to the European Parliament (2013/142/EU)

⁶ The survey was conducted by AMR GmbH Dusseldorf on behalf of the AECR. The poll was in the field on 25 and 26 of May on a sample base of 12,132 respondents across 15 EU countries (6,083 voters and 6,049 non-voters).

⁷ The source of these number is the TNS leader watch available at, <http://www.tnsglobal.com/what-we-do/european-leader-watch>

⁸ Analyses have shown that there has been little or no decline in individual countries, beyond a one-time drop often seen following the founding election in each country, but EU enlargement has

brought into the Union countries with lower turnout (both at EP and national elections) and its changing composition has certainly yielded declining turnout over the EU as a whole (see Franklin 2001; Trechsel, De Sio and Grazia 2014).

⁹ We need to acknowledge that it might also be the case that *Spitzenkandidaten* do not mobilize voters, but citizens who are mobilized to vote by other facets of the campaign are more motivated to acquire information (Shineman, 2012) and hence also gain information about the existence of the *Spitzenkandidaten*. Nevertheless this seems less likely given that previous research clearly shows that the acquisition of information during electoral campaigns, in our case being aware of the existence of competing candidates for the presidency of the EC, increases the propensity to turnout (Larcinese, 2007; Lassen, 2005).

¹⁰ As we have pointed out earlier, Schulz was the President of the European Parliament at the time of the election campaign, Juncker was the former Prime Minister of Luxembourg and head of the Euro Zone, and Verhofstadt was the Prime Minister of several previous Belgian governments.

¹¹ The EES part of the study was funded by a consortium of private foundations, led by the Volkswagen Foundation and supported in addition by the Mercator Foundation, the Swedish Riksbank Foundation, and the Portuguese Gulbenkian Foundation. The study benefited in addition from the generous support of TNS Opinion.

¹² More details regarding the study can be found at <http://eeshomepage.net/voter-study-2014/>; questionnaires in both English and French are available at the following link: eeshomepage.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Master-Questionnaire.pdf

¹³ “Socialists & Democrat (S&D)” (identified e.g. in Germany by mentioning the SPD), “European People's Party (EPP)” (identified in Germany by the CDU/CSU), “Liberals and Allies Group (ALDE)” (identified in German by the FDP) and finally “The Greens” (identified in Germany by Die Grünen). In countries where two or more parties were expected to join an EP

group, the biggest party was mentioned. In countries where there was no party supporting one of the four EP groups, only the name of the EP group was provided.

¹⁴ Given the distribution of the variable (see Appendix 1) and the limited campaign time, we chose to use a dummy variable that takes the value 1 if the candidate visited a country and 0 otherwise.

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that post-communism, the level of GDP per capita, and turnout in the previous national elections are highly correlated. Controlling for any of the three yielded a very similar pattern of results (i.e. the significance levels for the effects of interest were the same).

¹⁶ As the effect of campaign visits might be related to the population size (either because candidates might want to avoid small countries or because citizens in small countries consider themselves irrelevant for the outcome), we also control for the number of MEPs (as a measure of the population size) as an addition robustness check. This analysis is presented in Appendix 5 and the results are very similar to those presented in Table 2 (using the log of the population or the actual size of the population instead of the number of MEPs reveals a very similar pattern of results). Another option would be to weight the number of visits by the population size (i.e. number of MEPs), we present these results in Appendix 6. Still as population size was previously linked to turnout, we consider that mixing the two indicators in one variable is not the best solution. Another robustness check consists of including individual level turnout in the previous legislative elections in our models (see Appendix 7). Even if this is a stringent robustness test the results presented in Appendix 7 hold (i.e. they are very similar to the ones in Table 2). This indicates that even after taking into account whether respondents are habitual voters, our results hold.

¹⁷ The analysis is conducted in R, using the lme4 package version 1.1-7.

¹⁸ Both in Belgium and in the UK, there are effectively two party systems in operation: the Walloon and the Flemish in the Belgian case, and the British and Northern Irish in the UK case.

Furthermore in the case of the UK, Northern Ireland and Great Britain had very different electoral systems in place to select the EP candidates. However, using country as a nesting unit reveals a very similar pattern of results (see Appendix 8).

¹⁹ In Table 2 we only present a short version of the full models. For the models with all the controls see Table 3 in Appendix 3

²⁰ All predicted probabilities were computed using simulations based on the normal distribution of coefficients, while keeping all continuous variables at their mean and all categorical variables at zero.

²¹ Among other indicators our models take into account political knowledge and political interest that are the most likely “suspects”.

²² Everything else being equal, the predicted probability to vote for respondents who live in a country in which Schulz campaigned is 44% compared to a baseline predicted probability of 32% for those who live in another country. In the case of Verhofstadt the effect is equally noteworthy, the predicted probability of a respondent living in a country that he campaigned is 44% compared to 37% for those living in other countries.

²³ What is still puzzling is that while the effect of campaign visits in Models 3 and 4 is statistically significant, it does not help to explain the random variance of the intercept.

²⁴ When plotting the predicted probabilities for each group (see Appendix 4 figure A3A, A3B and A3C) we can see that the confidence intervals in all three figures overlap. However, even if the confidence interval overlap, the mean difference between group can be statistically significant greater than zero, which shows a statistically significant difference (Afshartous and Preston, 2010). This is exactly the case in Figure 3A and Figure 3B.

²⁵ All models presented in Table 2 also include the following controls: marital status, education, age gender, employment status, rural, religiosity, union membership, level of political discussion,

news exposure, campaign exposure, contact by politician, trust in national parliament, trust in EU institutions, evaluation of EU membership, compulsory voting, concurrent national election, turnout in national election, candidate nationality and number of MEP (see Appendix 3 for full models).

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